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A Wonderful Night

An Interpretation of Christmas

By James H. Snowden

Decorations by Maud and Miska Petersham

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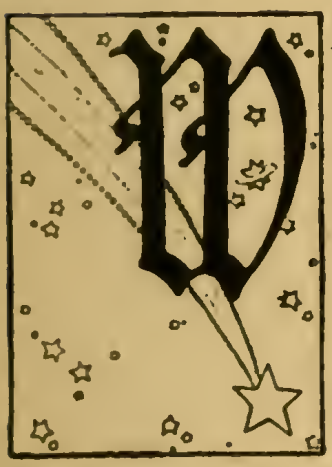
O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee to-night.

—*Phillips Brooks.*

A Wonderful Night

A Wonderful Night

I. An Age of Wonders



WE live in an age of wonders. Great discoveries and startling events crowd upon us so fast that we have scarcely recovered from the bewildering effects of one before another comes, and we are thus kept in a constant whirl of excitement. The heavens are full of shooting stars, and while watching one we are distracted by another. So frequent is this experience that our nerves almost refuse to respond to the shock of a new sensation. We are no longer surprised at

surprises. The marvelous has become the commonplace, and the unexpected is what we now expect.

Yet we are not to suppose that our age is the only one that has had its wonders. Other times had theirs also, only these old-time wonders have become familiar to us and ceased to be wonderful; but in their day they were marvelous, and some of them equalled if they did not surpass any wonders we have witnessed. The Great War was the most cataclysmic eruption that has ever convulsed the world, but it was not more revolutionary and sensational in the twentieth century than the French Revolution was in the eighteenth and the Reformation was in the sixteenth century. The discovery of America in the fifteenth century created immense excitement and was relatively a more colossal and startling occurrence than anything that has happened since.

The telescope and the Copernican theory were as great achievements in their day as the spectroscope and the nebular hypothesis are in our day. The most useful inventions and the most marvelous products of the human brain are not the railway and telegraph after all. The art of printing, which infinitely multiplies thought and sows it in the very air and every morning photographs the world anew, is a more useful invention and in its day was a great wonder. Still farther back, hidden in the mists of antiquity, lies the invention of the alphabet that is even more useful and marvelous. It is when we get back to the oldest tools, the hammer and plough and loom, that we come to inventions of the greatest fundamental utility, and we could better afford to give up all our modern magic machines than to part with these.

The oldest literature is ever the ripest,

richest and best, and Homer and Shakespeare overtop all our modern writers as the Alps overshadow the hills lying around their feet. What modern preacher can compare in eloquence and power with Paul and Isaiah? Nature is ever full of new wonders, and yet the grass was as green and the mountains as grand and the golden nets and silver fringes of the clouds were as resplendent in the days of Abraham as they are to-day. We are the heirs of the ages, but wonder and wisdom were not born with us, and with us they will not die.

Where must we go to find the greatest wonder? Not to the scientist's discoveries and the inventor's cunning devices: the greatest marvel is not material but spiritual; and to find it we must not look into the present or future, but go back to the first Christmas morning. On that morning the Judean shepherds had a story to tell which all they that heard it wondered at

and which is still the wonder and song of the world. The birth of Jesus is absolutely the greatest event of all time. Whatever view is taken of him he has become the Master of the world. Christ has created Christendom, silently lifting its moral level as mountains are heaved up against the sky from beneath. The coming of such a unique and powerful personality into the world is an infinitely greater wonder than the discovery of a new continent or the blazing out of a new star in the sky.

II. Preparation for the Event

EAR events may have remote causes. The river that sweeps by us cannot be explained without going far back to hidden springs in distant hills. The huge wave that breaks upon the ocean shore may have had its origin in a

submarine upheaval five thousand miles away.

A wide circle of causes converged towards this birth; all the spokes of the ancient world ran into this hub. When Abraham started west as an emigrant out of Babylonia, "not knowing whither he went," he was unconsciously traveling towards Bethlehem. Jewish history for centuries headed towards this culmination; this was the matchless blossom that bloomed out of all that growth from Abraham to Joseph and Mary. Priest and prophet, tabernacle and temple, gorgeous ritual and streaming altar, sacrifice and psalm, kingdom and captivity, triumph and tragedy were all so many roots to this tree. These were the education and discipline of the chosen people, preparing them as soil out of which the Messiah could spring. The great ideas of the unity and sovereignty, spirituality and righteousness of God, the sinfulness

of sin and the need of an atonement were in flaming picture language emblazoned before the people and burnt into their conscience. Christ could do nothing until these ideas were rooted in the world.

Pagan achievements, also, "the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome," were roots to this same tree of preparation for the coming of Christ, though they knew it not. Greece with all the glories of its philosophy and art showed that the world never could be saved by its own wisdom; and all the laws and legions of Rome were equally impotent to lift it out of the ditch of sin. Neither a brilliant brain nor a mailed fist can save a lost world. Yet both Greece and Rome made positive contributions to the preparation for Christ. Greece fashioned a marvelous instrument for propagating the gospel in its highly flexible and expressive language, and Rome reduced the world to

order and hushed it into peace and thus turned it into a vast amphitheater in which the gospel could be heard. Greece also contributed philosophy that threw light on the gospel, and Rome gave it a rich inheritance of law.

God thus set this event in a mighty framework of preparation. He got the world ready for Christ before he brought Christ to the world. He was in no haste and took plenty of time before he struck the great hour. The harvest must lie out in the showers and sunshine for weeks and months before it can ripen into golden wheat, and the meteor must shoot through millions of invisible miles for one brief flash of splendor. The centuries seemed slow-footed during that long and dreary stretch from Abraham to Mary, "but when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son."

III. A Wonderful Fulfillment of Prophecy

THIS birth was a wonderful fulfillment of prophecy. The Jews had cherished the hope of the promised Messiah for thousands of years. Through all their national vicissitudes, enslavement in Egypt, wanderings in the wilderness, establishment and growth in the promised land, internal division and external captivity in Babylon, restoration, and final subjection to the Romans, this hope burned on the horizon of their future as a fixed star. It was this that ever led them on and held them together and made it impossible to break or subdue their spirit. This was the dawn that filled all their dark and bitter days with the rosy glow of hope.

Yet the Messiah came not, and as the centuries slowly rolled along they must have grown weary and at times have doubted. Sceptics scoffed, "Where is the

sign of his coming?" But the great heart of the nation remained true to its trust, while prophets caught glimpses of the coming glory and white-headed, trembling old saints prayed that they might live a little longer and not die before he came. Perhaps this hope was never at a lower ebb than when the Roman power was ruthlessly grinding the nation down into the dust. But suddenly at this darkest hour a blinding light burnt through the floor of heaven and shepherds ran about announcing that the Messiah was born! Who can imagine the surprise, the wonder, the overwhelming amazement this news created? How many were eager to go to Bethlehem and see this thing which had come to pass! And when it was found to be true, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy and old men blessed God and said, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servants depart in peace."

Yet why should they have wondered at God's faithfulness in keeping his promise, as though he could ever have forgotten it or failed to bring it to pass? Why should we ever wonder at the faithfulness of God? Doubtless in some degree because of our human infirmity. Our sense of unity with God and trust in him have been weakened by sin until we are ready to doubt him as though he were one of ourselves. His promises also are so far-reaching and great, splendid and blessed, they so far surpass our thoughts of wisdom and mercy, that, even though they have been repeated to us until we are familiar with them, when they are fulfilled we wonder at the faithfulness that will bring so great things to pass.

IV. An Historical Event

THE story starts with the place and time of the Saviour's birth. Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the king. There are many myths and legends floating through the world that are often beautiful and useful, but they hang like gorgeous clouds in the air and are ever changing their shape and place. They are growths of the imagination and lack historic roots and reality. They are chary of names and dates and hide their origin in far-away mists. However powerfully and pathetically they may reflect the needs and hopes of the human heart, they are unsubstantial as dreams and afford no foundation on which to build our faith. Heathen religions are generally woven of this legendary stuff. The Greek and Roman divinities were all mythical. But

the scientific spirit has swept these imaginary deities out of our sky and rendered belief in them impossible. Our religion must be rooted in reality and cannot live in clouds, however beautifully they may be colored. We refuse hospitality to anything but fact. Give us names and dates, is our demand.

The Bible responds to this requirement. Christianity is an historical religion. The gospel narrative begins with no such indefinite statement as "Once upon a time," but it starts in Bethlehem of Judea. The town is there and we can stand on the very spot where Jesus was born. The narrative places the time of his birth in the days of Herod the king. History knows Herod; there is nothing mythical about this monster of iniquity. These statements are facts that no keenest critic or scholarly unbeliever can plausibly dispute. So the gospel sets its record in the

rigid frame of history; it roots its origin down in the rocky ledge of Judea. Christ was not born in a dream, but in Bethlehem. We are not, then, building our faith on a myth, but on immovable matters of fact. This thing was not done in a corner, but in the broad day, and it is not afraid of the geographer's map and the historian's pen. The Christmas story is not another beautiful legend in the world's gallery of myths, but is sober and solid reality; its story is history. Our religion is truth, and we will worship at no other altar.

V. Simplicity of the Narrative

HOUGH surcharged with such tremendous meaning, carrying a heavier burden of news than was ever before committed to human language, yet the simplicity with which the story is told is one of the literary marvels of the gospels. This event has inspired poets and painters and has been embroidered and illuminated with an immense amount of ornamentation. Genius has poured its splendors upon it and tried to give us some worthy conception of the scene. But the evangelists had no such purpose or thought, and their story is told with that charming artlessness that is perfect art. They were not men of genius, but plain men, mostly tax collectors and fishermen untrained in the schools, with no thought of skill or literary art. Yet all the stylists and artists of the world stand in wonder before their unconscious effort

and supreme achievement. No attempt at rhetoric disfigures their record, not a word is written for effect, but the simple facts are allowed to tell their own eloquent and marvelous tale. The inspired writers mixed no imagination with their verities, for they had no other thought than to tell the plain truth; and this gives us confidence in the trustworthiness of their narrative. These men did not follow cunningly devised fables when they made known unto us the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, for they were eye-witnesses of his glory.

VI. The Town of Bethlehem

HE land of Palestine is divided from north to south by a central range of mountains which runs up through this narrow strip of country like a spinal column. About five miles south of Jerusalem a ridge or spur shoots off from the central range towards the east. On the terminal bluff of this ridge lies the town of Bethlehem. On the west it is shut in by the plateau, and on the east the ridge breaks steeply down into the plain. Vineyards cover the hillsides with green and purple, and wheatfields wave in the valleys. In the distant east, across the Dead Sea, the mountains of Moab are penciled in dark blue against the sky.

At the present time the town has eight thousand inhabitants. Its flat-roofed houses are well built and its narrow streets are clean. It is a busy place, its chief

industry being the manufacture of souvenirs of olive wood which are sold throughout the Christian world. Its principal church is the Church of the Nativity, which is built over a cave that is one of the most sacred and memorable spots on the globe. It is believed that this cave is the place where Christ was born, and a silver star inlaid in the stone floor is intended to mark the exact spot. It was then used as the stable of the adjoining inn, and in its stone manger the infant Jesus may have been laid.

At the time of this event Bethlehem was a mere village of a few hundred people. It might have been thought that Jerusalem, the historic metropolis and proud capital of the country, the chosen city of God and seat of the temple and center of worship, a city beautiful for situation, magnificent in its architecture, sacred in its associations and world-wide and splen-

did in its fame, should have been honored with this supreme event in the history of the Jews. But an ancient prophet, while noting its comparative insignificance, had yet put his finger on this tiny point on the map and pronounced upon it a blessing that caused it to blaze out like a star amidst its rural hills. "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." And so proud Jerusalem was passed by, and this supreme honor was bestowed upon the humble village.

Great men, as a rule, are not born in cities. They come up out of obscure villages and hidden nooks and corners. They originate closer to nature than city-born men and seem to spring from the very soil. The most noted birthplace in Scot-

land is that of Burns: it is a humble cottage with a thatched roof and a stable in one end of it. The most celebrated birthplace in England is that of Shakespeare, and again it is a plain cottage in a country village. Lincoln was born in a log hut in the wilds of Kentucky, Mohammed was the son of a camel driver, and Confucius the son of a soldier. The city must go to the country for its masters, and the world draws its best blood and brains from the farm. It was in accordance with this principle that the Saviour of the world should be born, not in a city and palace, but in a country village, and that his first bed should be, not a downy couch, but a slab of stone.

VII. The Wonderful Night Draws Near

OW it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be enrolled." This is the point at which the orderly and scholarly Luke opens his account of the birth of our Lord. It seems like going a long way off from and around to the end in view. But there are no isolated facts and forces in the world and all things work together. When we see providence start in we never can tell where it is going to come out. If God is about to bless us, he may start the chain of causation that shall at length reach us in some far-off place or land; or if he is about to save a soul in China he may start with one of us in the contribution we make to foreign missions. Caesar Augustus, master of the world, from time to time ordered a census to be taken of the empire that he might

know its resources and reap from it a richer harvest of taxes. It was probably between the months of December and March, B. C. 5–4, that such a census was being taken in the province of Syria.

In accordance with ancient Jewish usage, all citizens repaired to the tribe and village from which they were descended, and were there enrolled. In the town of Nazareth in the north lived Joseph, a village carpenter, and Mary, his espoused wife, who though a virgin was great with child, having been overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and the mystery having been revealed to her and her betrothed husband. They were both descended from the royal line of David, and therefore to Bethlehem they must go. With us such a journey of eighty miles would mean no more than stepping on a railway car at nine o'clock in the morning and stepping off at noon. But with them it meant a toilsome journey

on foot of several days. Slowly they wended their way southward, led on by the irresistible hand of Cæsar, far away on his throne. The ancient Hebrew prophecy of Micah and the imperial decree of Cæsar thus marvelously fitted into each other and worked together. Mary must have known of this prophecy, and we know not with what a sense of mystery and fear and joy she drew near to the predicted place where the Messiah was to be born.

Bethlehem sits like a crown on its rocky ridge. At length its walls and towers loomed in the distance, and then presently up the steep road climbed the carpenter and his espoused wife and passed through the gate into the village. When they came to the inn, it was already crowded with visitors, driven thither by the decree of Cæsar that had set all Palestine in commotion. In connection with the inn, gen-

erally the central space of its four-square inclosure, but probably in this case a cave in the limestone rock, was a stable, or place for the camels and horses and cattle of the guests. Among these oriental people it was (and is) no uncommon thing for travelers, when the chambers of the inn were fully occupied, to make a bed of straw and spend the night in this place. In this stable, possibly the very cave where now stands the Church of the Nativity, Mary and Joseph found lodgings for the night. It was not a mark of degradation or social inferiority for them to do this, though it was an indication of their meager means, as wealthy visitors would doubtless have found better accommodations.

VIII. The Birth

IN that cave Mary brought forth her first-born son; and as there appears to have been no woman's hand there to minister to her, she herself wrapped the new-born babe in swaddling clothes; and as there was no other cradle or bed to receive it, she laid the child in the trough from which the camels were fed. This is all we know of what took place on that memorable night from which the history of the Christian world is now dated. The apocryphal gospels, legends that afterwards grew up, fill the chamber with supernal light so that visitors had to shade their eyes from the splendor of the child; and the painters portray the holy child and mother with halos of glory around their heads. But this is all imagination and myth. Jesus was born as other human beings are born, and looked just like a human child.

No one seeing him could have guessed that a unique birth had ruptured the continuity of nature and brought a divine Man into the world. There was no glory streaming from his person, and no spectacular display of pageantry and pomp such as attended the birth of a Cæsar. The Son of Man did not come with observation, but stole into the world silently and unseen. If we could have gazed upon the Christ-child as it lay in its manger, we would have been disappointed and thought that nothing extraordinary had happened. But a great event rarely seems great at the time; long centuries may elapse before it looms into view and is seen in its central place as the axis of history. Outward size and circumstance do not measure inward power and possibility. God brought only a child into the world that night, but in that Child were sheathed ominipotent wisdom and mercy and might to save the world.

IX. No Room in the Inn

THERE was no room for them in the inn." And so Jesus came into a world where there was no room for him in the habitations of men. After all this preparation through which the centuries grew into readiness for his coming, after all these types and prophecies, sacrifices and symbols, after all this weary waiting and passionate hope and all these golden dreams, when the promised One came there was no room for him and he was not wanted! "He came unto his own, and his own received him not." Was there ever a greater and sadder anticlimax and a more cruel disappointment? Let us admit that there may have been no fault in this matter, no lack of hospitality in the keeper or the guests of the inn, as the village was overcrowded, and the fact that these late arrivals were compelled to put up with a

place out in the enclosure, possibly a cave, where the animals were kept, was no intended incivility or uncommon hardship. Nevertheless, whatever may have been the reason, the fact was that there was no room for Jesus in that inn the first night he spent in this world, and this fact was sadly prophetic of his reception in the world he came to save.

There were few places where he did find welcome: generally there was no room for him even in places where he had the most reason and right to expect it. And if it was no lack of hospitality that kept him out of this inn, it certainly was the lack of this grace and the positive presence of hostility that in after life excluded him from many places where he wanted to be.

Jesus was not wanted in his own country: Herod tried to leave no room for him there. He was not wanted in his own

town: his neighbors tried to hurl him down a cliff to his death. He was not wanted in his own church: its ministers and doctors of divinity fell upon him in malignant fury and at last crucified him. Even his own family found it hard to make room for him in their inner circle. Small room was there in this evil world for this pure and lowly spirit. Then why did he come to it? Because he so loved it that he gave himself for it. Small room do we still leave for Jesus as we crowd him out of our hearts and lives and out of our social order and civilization with our selfishness and sin. Is it a discouraging fact that there is so little room for Christ in the world? Then let us note the fact that there is more room for him to-day than ever before, and this room is ever widening.

How much that inn missed by not having room for this mother and her babe! Its finest apartment lost a glory that fell

upon the manger out of which the cattle were fed. How much shall we miss if we do not have room for Christ? There is one world where there is room for Jesus and where he is wanted: heaven. And all who are like him shall find room with him in its many mansions.

X. Angel Ministry

ERUSALEM and Rome knew nothing of this event. The High Priest offered the evening sacrifice unaware that it was rendered obsolete by the coming of the true Sacrifice, and Cæsar slept that night without a dream that a Rival had been born who would uproot his empire and erect a worldwide kingdom. Earth was unconscious of this birth, but heaven knew it. There was holy ecstacy

in all the shining ranks above, and "angels seem, as birds new-come in spring, to have flown hither and thither, in songful mood, dipping their white wings into our atmosphere, just touching the earth or glancing along its surface, as sea birds skim the surface of the sea."

Around all the events of the birth and ministry of Christ there are the flutter and flash of angel wings, and this story would lose much of its music and charm if it were stripped of its angel ministration. The Bible is full of angels. They appear to Zacharias the mother of John the Baptist, and they find Mary the virgin mother, as a beam of morning light finds a white-leafed flower, and reveal the mystery that has come upon her. No sooner is the infant Jesus laid in his manger than the door of heaven opens and there comes trooping forth a radiant throng, filling the midnight sky with splendor and pro-

claiming to earth the glad tidings. Angels ministered to Jesus in the wilderness and strengthened him in the garden. More than twelve legions of angels waited to do his bidding when he was arrested. Angels rolled away the stone from his tomb and sat by the empty grave, announcing his resurrection as they had announced his birth; and as they thronged the skies at his coming, so they hovered in the air at his going; and when he comes again he shall come in his glory with all the holy angels with him.

These angels are still in the world as the ministers of God, though invisible to mortal eyes. We see the firefly only through the little luminous section of its flight, but it still flies on after it ceases to be visible. So we see these angels only through that shining section of their path in which they waited on Jesus; but they are still flying through the world as invisible spirits.

The angels of little ones are always before the face of their Father in heaven, and as they bore the spirit of Lazarus to Abraham's bosom, so they still may bear departing spirits up the shining stairway of the stars to the eternal home. We know not in what wide ways they minister to us; how there is a rush of angel wings to the cradle of every new-born babe; how they constantly pitch their tents around us in the viewless fields of air; and how often they bear us up lest we dash our feet against a stone.

How little we know of the world in which we live! We weigh its rocks and grind them up and melt them in our crucibles; we fling our nets through all space and catch the stars; and when we can find nothing more to measure and analyze we think we have found and explained all. But the finest and best things cannot be grasped by these coarse pro-

cesses. Sunbeams cannot be weighed on hay-scales, and gorgeously-colored bits of cloud cannot be caught in a crucible. We can weigh the new-born baby, but not the mother's love for her child. A telescope cannot see an angel, though millions of them may be flying across its field of vision. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. In our blind materialism we need to have our eyes opened that we may know that this universe, which often seems so empty and dark to us, is a blazing sea of spiritual splendor in which burning suns float as black specks and which is thronged with troops of angels that do the will of God and wait on us.

XI. Angels and Shepherds

THE Christ-child was born, and now the problem was to get the wonderful news out into the world. There were no newspapers to announce it in startling headlines and cry it out upon the morning air, and, if there had been, their reporters would not have been keen enough to discover it and probably would have had no interest in it. God used other means. An angel came from heaven to proclaim the great event to earth. Where shall he begin, what human ears shall first have the privilege of hearing the glad tidings? Let the angel go to Jerusalem, we would have said, and call upon the High Priest and first take him into his confidence, and then let him go to the Temple and stand amidst the splendors of that holy sanctuary and announce to the assembled priests and scribes that prophecy had been fulfilled

and their long-expected Messiah had come. Shall not some respect be paid to official places and persons? Has not God ordained priests and presbyters through whom he dispenses his grace and administers his kingdom?

Yet history witnesses that at times few men stand in God's way more than ecclesiastics. They are rarely the men that earliest hear a new message: God must usually tell it to some one else first. One of the most startling things in the Bible is the fact that the announcement of the birth of Christ was made, not to priests, but to shepherds, and the gospel was first preached, not in a church, but in a pasture field where there were more sheep than men to hear.

What a rebuke is this to our ecclesiastical pretension and pride! God can easily dispense with us, and may pass us by to speak to some humbler soul. The great

people up in the Temple have no monopoly of his grace, and it may break out in some wholly unexpected place. The gospel is no respecter of places and persons. It may be preached in a costly church or stately cathedral, but it is equally at home in a country school house, or in a wooden tabernacle, or in a sheep pasture. In simplicity and catholicity it is adapted to all classes and conditions of life. It has the same message for priest and people, prince and peasant, scholar and shepherd, and all receive from it an equal welcome and blessing.

XII. The Concert in a Sheep Pasture

IN the night of the Nativity the shepherds were in the field keeping watch over their flocks, for those faithfully engaged in the lowliest duties may receive a splendid visitation from heaven. The night did not seem different from other nights. The skies were as serene and the stars burned as calm as in all the past. The shepherds were as unconscious of any coming wonder as the sleeping sheep that lay like drifted snow on the ridges. Yet the heavens were strained tense with expectation and were on the point of being shattered into song. Flocks of angels were flying downward from the stars, and as their white wings struck earth's atmosphere they kindled it into radiance with heavenly glory, and from the gallery of the skies they chanted their song, accompanied with all the golden harps and deep-toned

organ pipes of the celestial choir. Never before or since was such a concert heard in this world, and yet only shepherds and sheep were present to hear it. The encircling hills were the grand amphitheater in which it was rendered, the grassy slopes were the only seats, and there were no tickets of admission, but, like the gospel itself, it was given without money and without price. Musical artists are often sensitive and critical and exclusive people, chary of a free exercise of their gifts and particular as to their audience, but angels will sing for anybody.

The simple-minded shepherds were sore afraid at this outburst of heavenly music, as wiser people would have been. An angel voice sang the solo:

Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour,

which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.

"Be not afraid!" Sin has wrought such disorder in this world that the thought of spirit visitors frightens us and heaven itself must not come too near. There are great reasons for fear in this darkened world, but the coming of Jesus into it is not one of them. His only mission is to release us from the bondage and bitterness of sin and let us out into the glorious liberty and joy of the sons of God. And Christ has in a marvelous degree cast fear out of the world and poured joy through all its channels, as the sun disperses the night and spills its splendor over hills and vales.

The good tidings announced the birth of a Saviour, and this is the best news this sin-stricken world can hear, for sin is the

root of all our fear and misery. Back of every bitter tear lies a guilty thought or deed. This connection is often visible upon the surface and stabs us in the face, and then it may lie hidden under many generations, but it is always there. Sin is the disease that poisons all our blood and blights our physical and moral and spiritual health and happiness. Cut this ugly tree up by the roots and all its scarlet fruits and poisonous leaves will wither; cure this disease and our human world will be transformed into a new Paradise of God. A Saviour is the supreme need of the world, and his birth was news good enough to bring singing angels to earth and fill all the centuries with song.

Definite directions were given for finding the new-born Saviour in the city of David, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger. The angelic message was not simply a song in the air, a halo

of celestial light, a splendid but fading vision, but it bound itself down to definite places and circumstances and left something solid. Again we note that this thing was not done in a corner and is not afraid of facts. Jesus was a true human child and took upon him our form down to his infant clothes. The Christ is a great wonder in his divine personality, ever transcending our utmost comprehension, but we can understand his swaddling bands. Christianity is not all mystery, but it also comes down close around us and embodies itself in many plain facts and duties. "Ye shall find the babe." The shepherds were not left to wander around in uncertainty, but sent direct to the place. Christ is not hidden from us, clear directions point out the place where he is, and every soul that seeks him shall find him.

The angel solo broke out into a heavenly chorus which gave a broad in-

terpretation of the meaning of the birth of Christ:

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men in whom he is well pleased.

This chorus first acribes glory to God, for all things good and beautiful come from him and express his glory, as all rays of daylight shoot from the sun and are its splintered splendor. The gift of Christ manifests the glory of God in that it displays the divine wisdom in devising the plan of salvation, the divine power in executing it, and the divine love as its mighty motive. The glory of God, that streams through the heavens as through a dome of many-colored glass, is concentrated and burns with the interest brightness in the person of his Son.

The chorus next pronounces peace upon men. Divine glory and human good will are related as cause and effect. When men

get right with God they at once get right with one another, as the center of a circle, when truly located, pulls every point on the circumference into its proper place in the curve; but when men are at variance with God they are at enmity among themselves. Divine glory is the sun shining in the heavens; human good will is a garden and orchard all abloom with flowers and laden with fruit. As the glory of the sun is transformed into rosy buds and sweet fruit, so is the glory of God transformed into human good will. The glory of God and the peace of men are never in antagonism, but are always complementary and harmonious, they are the two sides of the same gospel, two parts of the same song. They cannot be separated and must go together; in glorifying God we make peace among men, and in making peace among men we glorify God.

XIII. The First Visitors to Bethlehem

THE angels' song died away in the solemn silence, and the shepherds were left alone. It was a critical hour with them. Would they follow this vision and turn it into victory, or would they let it vanish with the last echo of the song and relapse into the old dull routine? No, they did not let it pass, and life was never the same to them again. "Let us now go," they said, "even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." They translated vision into action and presently were climbing the rocky slope to Bethlehem. Had these shepherds not followed up the message their knowledge of their Messiah would have immediately been cut short. We hear divine messages and see heavenly visions enough, but too often we let them fade into forgetfulness

and pass into nothingness. A message does us no good until it becomes action, the grandest vision that ever swept through our brain or illuminated our sky leaves no vestige of worth unless it is turned into conduct and character. "Let us now go and see this thing." We do not know Christ until we see him as our Saviour. Seeing is believing, this is the simplicity of faith, and when we see Christ through the direct vision and personal experience of faith and obedience we are transfigured into his likeness.

"And they came with haste, and found both Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in the manger." Were they disappointed at the humble mother, wife of a workingman, and at the manger cradle? These did not match the desire and expectation of the Jews. They had long cherished the passionate hope of an earthly prince who would come wearing purple

robes and marshaling armies to trample hated oppressors under feet and make Jerusalem the mistress of the world. They would have said that the Christ should be born in a palace and laid on softest down and covered with silken robes. What a surprise was this manger to their thoughts and shock to their feelings. Were ever deep-seated, long-cherished hopes treated with more cruel irony? But God's ways are not as our ways. Christ was brought into the world at the very point where he could get the deepest strongest hold upon it and most powerfully swing it starward from the dust. He was born among neither the very rich nor the very poor, but in the great middle class at the center of gravity of humanity, by lifting which he would lift the world. Had he come as a pampered child of wealth he would never have got hold of the great heart of humanity; but he came as one of

the people, knitting himself into humble relations, growing up among plain folk of the countryside and toiling as a common workingman. And so when he began to preach the common people heard him gladly.

Promise was exactly matched by fulfillment. "Ye shall find a babe," was the promise of the angel, and now the record reads, "And they found the babe." When did God ever lead us to expect anything and then disappoint us? He gave us thirst that urges us to find water, and matching this need he has created bubbling springs and sparkling streams. He gave us hunger that seeks bread, and it finds fields of golden grain and orchards of rosy fruit. He gave us minds that seek truth, and they find it; he gave us a craving for love, and heart matches heart. He set eternity in our hearts and gave us deep instincts that reach after the Infinite, hearts that

cry, "Shew, us the Father and it sufficeth us." Shall all lower needs be satisfied and this supreme search and cry of the soul be disappointed and mocked? "And they found the babe," is the answer to this need and promise. God sends us with all our deep needs and mysterious longings to that cradle in Bethlehem, where they will be exactly and fully matched and satisfied. He that hath seen this Child hath seen the Father.

The shepherds, having seen for themselves, immediately began to make known abroad the saying which was told them concerning the Child. The gospel is a social and expansive blessing and cannot be shut up in the individual heart. We are saved to serve, we are told the good news that we may tell it to others, we get it that we may give it. And the more we give it the more we get it, for this bread multiplies in our own hands as we share

it with others, as did the loaves beside the Galilean sea. Great souls have ever grown rich by the lavish prodigality with which they bestowed their gifts on others, and because Jesus gave himself God hath highly exalted him.

First angels and then shepherds: how startling the contrast. Jesus has deep affinities with both: on his divine side he is related to heaven, and on his human side he is related to earth. And the first men he drew to his side were shepherds, representatives of the common people. He did not come as a member of any special class, especially of the upper class. No one can ever save the world by winning over the rich and the great. Society cannot be lifted from the top. Whoever would raise the level of society must get his lever under its foundation stones. Taking hold of the carved cornice will tear the roof off and lift it away from the building,

but raising the lowest stone will also push up the spire's gilded point. He who elevates the peasant will also in time elevate the prince. Jesus did not begin with Cæsar, but with shepherds, and then in three hundred years a Christian Cæsar sat on the throne.

The gospel still works from beneath; going down into the slums of Christian cities; working among the poor and degraded of heathen lands; and seeking the lowest tribes of men from whom have been defaced almost the last vestige of humanity and restoring them to the image of God. Christ is saving the world as a whole. He is not slicing the loaf of society horizontally, cutting off the upper crust, but he is slicing it vertically from top to bottom.

How wonderful is the simplicity and beauty of this gospel that shepherds are drawn by it. It takes some brain to read

Plato. Shepherds would not get much out of Sir Isaac Newton, or a child out of Shakespeare, or a sorrowing heart out of Emerson. But every one can get milk and honey for his soul out of the gospel of Jesus. His wonderful words of life have the same sweetness and saving power for shepherd and scholar, peasant and prince. However lowly and unlettered one may be there is wide room for him around the manger of this Child.

XIV. The Star and the Wise Men

THE birth of Jesus created a new center for the world and set heaven and earth revolving around his cradle. All things began to gravitate towards him as by a new and more powerful attraction. Angels sang, shepherds wondered,

a new star glittered upon the blazing curtain of the night, and wise men came from afar to worship him. These wise men were Persian priests, scholars, scientists, astrologers, students of the stars. Rumors of a coming King or Saviour were widespread in the ancient world and doubtless had reached these worshipers of the sun to whom the stars were embodiments of deity. A new star in their sky, whatever it may have been, would instantly at-attract their attention and receive from them a religious interpretation. The celestial messenger was a fulfillment of their hope and a guide to their feet. They were obedient to the heavenly vision, and across long burning stretches of desert sand they came and appeared in Jerusalem with their inquiry concerning the new-born King of the Jews.

They were therefore broad-minded men whose horizon was wider than their own

deserts, or they never would have overleaped their national piety and patriotism and prejudice into search and reverence for a Jewish king. But something told them that the new King, though born a Jew, was of universal interest and was more than human; they forefelt his divinity. Therefore they were come to the King, not to gratify their curiosity, not to speculate and debate and frame a new creed, but to worship him. There was no war between the science and the theology of these wise men. Their science did not kill their religion, and their religion did not strangle their science. The stars, according to their simple-minded way of thinking, did not crowd God out of his universe. Knowledge and reverence made one music in their minds as both science and faith grew from more to more.

A religion that could not stand the most searching and pitiless light of scholarship

could not live. Science kills pagan faiths as with a stroke of lightning. But the gospel lives, because wise men go to Bethlehem and find there, not fiction, but fact. It welcomes and inspires the profoundest science and philosophy. God in his Word is not afraid of God in his works. The tallest intellects in all these centuries have bowed at the side of this manger.

XV. A Frightened King

THE inquiry of the wise men startled Jerusalem and frightened Herod. The proud metropolis had not yet heard the news. The immortal honor of having given birth to the Christ had been denied to her haughty brow and had become humble Bethlehem's imperishable crown. The very name of king gave

Herod a terrible shock. He was a usurper steeped in crime and was ever trembling on his throne. No hunted, white-faced, Russian Czar ever feared nihilist's bomb more than he feared rebellion's revolt and assassin's knife. Rebel after rebel he had crushed into spattered brains and blood, and here was rumor of another Rival born under the shadow of his throne. Herod was troubled and his terror sent a strange wave and shudder of fear through the city. So the same gospel that made angels sing and wise men worship and started good news out over the world, created consternation and trouble up in Herod's palace and in his city. Christ came to give peace and joy, but his gospel is a sword to some. The good man's presence is always the bad man's condemnation and stirs hatred in his heart. Every good influence that falls upon us, according as we use it, brings either more joy or trouble,

and the gospel itself is either a savor of life unto life, or of death unto death.

XVI. An Impotent Destroyer

HEROD took swift and thorough measures, as he thought, to crush his new rival. He called the priests into his counsel and demanded to know where the Christ should be born. Too often has the priest been subject to the beck and call of the king. Bad men will use the church for their own evil purposes when they can, and will then grow condescending and complaisant towards the minister and liberal in their gifts. We must be ready to receive and help any man, but we must beware of men that push their way into the church for sinister ends. The church is no man's tool, and

when it is thus prostituted its power and glory are gone.

The priests knew their Bibles and, in answer to Herod's question, put their finger on the very text and town. They knew where Christ was to be born, but they did not know Christ when he was born. We may have an exhaustive knowledge of the letter of the Bible and yet not know its spirit; we may know many things about Christ and yet not know Christ.

Herod, having gained knowledge of Christ, immediately turned it against Christ. He sent searchers after the child, falsely and wickedly pretending that he also wanted to come and worship him. There is no truth, or means of good, or gift of God so holy and blessed that men will not turn it to evil ends. Afterward Herod, in blind but impotent rage, sent soldiers and thrust a sword through every

cradle in Bethlehem; but the Child, sheathed in omnipotence, had escaped, and Herod could sooner have crushed the earth flat than have hurt a hair of his head.

Herod was the forerunner of a long line of enemies who have endeavored to kill this Child. Pagan Rome poured the fires of ten dreadful persecutions on the heads of his followers, but they could not extinguish his name in fire and blood. Often have the fires of martyrdom been kindled around his disciples, but they have stood faithful to him. Skeptical scholarship has tried to reduce his gospel to a fable and even to resolve Jesus himself into a myth, but as soon could it dissolve the rocky ledge of Bethlehem into vapor and cloud. And did not Voltaire prophecy in 1760 that ere the end of the eighteenth century Christianity would disappear from the earth? Many are the authors and books

that have thought to make an end of Jesus, but he still lives the same yesterday and to-day. And does not unbelief and unfaithfulness in our hearts also try to strangle this Child? Every evil thought we cherish and every evil deed we do are so many swords we thrust into his cradle. Herod has a long and numerous progeny, and we may find them close to our own door and even in our own hearts.

The star appears to have been invisible to the wise men while they were in Jerusalem—in that guilty city, which in its pride thought it had a monopoly of divine favor, the stars of faith were eclipsed by a worldly spirit—but when they emerged from the city the star once more led them on and stood over where the young Child was. God has put many stars in our sky to lead us on to Christ. The stars themselves are as vocal with divine messages as though every one of them were a golden

bell hung in the dome of the night to ring out some good news from God. The Bible is a great constellation in which every promise and precept is a star, and all its stars stand over Christ. All the Christian centuries are starred with events and achievements that point to Christ as King.

XVII. Splendid Gifts

ND they came into the house and saw the young child with Mary his mother; and they fell down and worshipped him; and opening their treasures they offered unto him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." Is there anything more beautiful in the Bible, or in all literature? The imagination of painter or poet may well kindle at the scene. There are the wondering mother, the worshiping

wise men bowing down, the shining fragrant gifts, and in the midst, as the center and glory of it all, the young Child. This Child, which even in its infancy subordinates mother and wise men and gold to itself, is indeed a King. Worship is the expression of reverence, and reverence is the root of all worth and divineness in life. The human soul is a poor and pitiful fragment until it is completed and crowned with worship, a lost child until it finds its Father. The wise men found a King to worship; they were not following a false guide across weary wastes into nothingness. Our instinct of worship is not false, but is true and is matched with its appropriate satisfaction. Christ completes our human childhood with divine Fatherhood. He that hath seen him hath seen the father.

These Persian scholars were forerunners of other wise men going to Bethlehem.

Through all the Christian centuries men of genius have been laying their most precious gifts at the feet of Christ. Columbus had no sooner set foot on a new shore than he named it San Salvador, Holy Saviour; and thus he laid his great discovery, America, at the feet of Jesus. Leonardo da Vinci swept the golden goblets from the table of his "Last Supper" because he feared their splendor would distract attention from and dim the glory of the Master himself. The hand that rounded St. Peter's dome reared it in adoration to Christ, and Raphael in painting the Transfiguration laid his masterpiece at the feet of this Child. Mozart there laid his symphonies, and Beethoven the works of his colossal genius. Shakespeare, "with the best brain in six thousand years," who has poured the many-colored splendors of his imagination over all our life, wrote in his will: "I commend

my soul into the hands of God my Creator, hoping and assuredly believing, through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour, to be made partaker of life everlasting." Tennyson begins his In Memoriam, in the judgment of many the superbest literary blossom of the nineteenth century, with the invocation, "Strong Son of God, immortal Love."

Though Jesus wrote no book himself and never wrote any recorded thing except a few words in the sand which some passing breeze or foot quickly obliterated, yet out of him have grown vast forests of literature. It would tear great gaps in the shelves of any library and leave the remaining volumes spotted with blank spaces if all the books about him and references to him were removed. A thousand books have been written about Lincoln and eighty thousand about Napoleon, but if all the books that were ever written about

Lincoln and Washington and Napoleon and Cæsar were piled up in one heap it would look small beside the mountain of books that have been written about Jesus Christ. Not only have the writers written about him above every other figure in history, but in like degree the artists have painted him and the musicians have sung about him. He is the most fertile theme of all literature and art, and the gifts that genius have heaped about his feet are an incomparable testimony to the adoration that is paid to him.

About the first use to which any notable invention is put is to spread the gospel of Jesus. The very first book printed on a printing press was the Bible, and this wonderful and perhaps greatest human invention has been busier printing this book than any other to this day and multiplies its copies by the hundred million over the world. The newspaper is a mighty

means of spreading his principles. The railway and steamship carry his gospel, and the airship gives wings to the same good news. Telegraph and telephone flash it, and wireless waves set the ether over whole continents and oceans aquiver with the messages of Jesus Christ. The sewing machine sews for him, the typewriter writes for him, and even battle ships and bayonets may fight for him. Sooner or later every inventor must lay his magic machine at his feet. For him the statesman legislates, the scientist investigates, the author writes, the artist paints and the singer sings. In an increasing degree Jesus is drawing all men into his service, and they are laying their treasures at his feet. The gold of the wise men was only the first gleam of the shining heaps of wealth that his followers are now piling on the altar of his service. This process will go on until the whole world will lie at his feet.

Every generation sends a more numerous company to Bethlehem. With every century worshipers arrive from more distant lands. From every quarter of the circumference of the globe paths now run to the manger of this Child, worn deep by millions of feet. The nations are beginning to come. By and by these converging paths will be crowded and all the ends of the earth shall bring their gold and shall worship at his feet.

What is the explanation of the mighty, worldwide, attractive power of this Child? There is only one adequate explanation: "He shall save his people from their sins." The world is tired of men who come to save it with programmes only an inch long; who have nothing better to propose than longer laws and cleaner sanitation; who, unmindful of the experiment in Eden, would have us believe that if we were only placed in a pleasant garden

where we had plenty to eat and little to do we would all be good. The weary world wants one who can go to the root of its unrest, and it is finding out that this can be done by him who is mighty to save people from their sins. All who put their trust in him are blessed with purity and peace. In this great world, lost in sin and beaten upon by infinite mystery, there is only one voice that comes like music across our life with power to cleanse and comfort us; and this is the Voice whose infant cry was first heard in Bethlehem. Let us now go even unto Bethlehem while the song is in the air and see this Child and worship at his feet.

XVIII. Was a Child the Best Christmas Gift to the World?

HEN we come to think of it, does not a child seem an insignificant and disappointing gift for God to make to the world? After so long preparation and so great promises and hopes, would we not have expected some greater and more wonderful gift? But a child is so common; millions are born every month; there is nothing unique and wonderful about a child. Why did God not rather give some invention or discovery or piece of knowledge that would revolutionize and bless the world? Would he not have done enormously more for mankind if in the first century of our era he had given them the printing press, or the steam engine, or the electric light? May there not yet be waiting for us some invention or knowledge that will work wonders beyond any-

thing we have dreamed and shower material comforts on the world?

This thought grows out of our blind materialism which leads us to think that matter is the master of mind, circumstance more important than character and the things of the body than the things of the spirit. But material improvements do not necessarily improve men. The locomotive has little relation to character. It picks a man up at one point and drops him at another the same man he was. If he is selfish and wicked at the beginning of the journey, he is just as selfish and wicked at its end. It is a simple fact that all our material progress works little improvement in morals. At the hour Christ was born Rome had an amazing material civilization, blazing with splendor, but all the more rapidly was it rotting at the core.

But a child has in it the possibility of

growth and of imparting regenerating ideas and a new life to the world. Sir Isaac Newton did not give any money or material gift to the world, but he gave it scientific ideas and a scientific spirit, and in giving it this he raised the intellectual level of the world and gave it the power of making millions of money. Shakespeare gave the world no new machine, but he opened the eyes of men to see heavenly visions and thus enriched them with treasures above all the gold of the world. Martin Luther invented no steam engine or sewing machine, but he taught men the rights of conscience and created our modern liberties. No material thing, however powerful and splendid, can make a better world: this work calls for better men. Therefore when God brings into the world a child endowed with superior intellectual and moral power, though his gift is only a babe and seems insignificant

and hardly worth counting among so many, yet he has sent one of the greatest gifts of which his omnipotence is capable. An old German schoolmaster always took his hat off to each new boy that came into his school, never knowing what elements of genius might have been mixed in his newly molded brain. When Erasmus came out of that school his prophetic instinct was justified. Never despise a child, for in it sleeps some of the omnipotence and worth of God.

But the Child which God gave the world as its Christmas gift was no merely human child however richly endowed. This Child was human and was born in time, but he was also divine and came forth from eternity. The possibilities that were sleeping in this Child were foreseen by the prophet Isaiah in the names that were prophetically given him, every name being a window through which we can look in upon his

personality and power, every title being one of his crowns: "His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." All these powers and possibilities are incarnated in this Child, and he is working them out in a redeemed world. God made no mistake, then, he gave us no small and common gift, but he did his best and gave the world the greatest possible Christmas Gift when this Child was born. All the grass in the world came from one seed, all the roses from one root, and all the redeemed that shall at last populate heaven and fill it with praise throughout eternity shall be saved by the grace and clad in the beauty of this Child.

XIX. A World Without Christmas

HAT would be the effect of blotting Christmas out of the calendar of the world? Imagination would have to explore wide and deep in order to trace all the consequences. The gladdest holiday of the year would fade into a common day. The weeks that precede it would lose all their interest of preparation and expectation and would sink into dull days. The stores would not blossom out into brilliant bazars, cunning fingers would not be busy in secret, there would be no making and buying and hiding gifts, and there would be nothing waiting to be disclosed on Christmas morning! The morning of this day would dawn gray and bleak just like any other morning, and no red letter would distinguish it on the calendar of the year. There would be no glad greetings with the first streak of light, no rush for gifts and

joyous surprises, no home gatherings, no neighborhood festivities, no benefactions to the poor. The tide of life would not on this day rise higher and run fuller and take on richer colors and sparkle with brighter joy, but it would remain at the old level and creep along in the same dull sluggish way.

Deeper losses would result from blotting this day from the calendar. There would be no story to tell of that wondrous birth that took place on the first Christmas morning and fixed the date from which all other events are dated. To blot Christmas out of the world we would have to blot nineteen Christian centuries from the history of the world; in truth, we would have to go farther back and dig up the roots of Hebrew history running through twenty centuries. We would have to go through the world and destroy every church and Christian institution: nearly

every hospital would go down under this fell decree, and most of our schools and colleges. Our Bibles would all have to be burned, and our literature would be perforated and ripped to pieces. Furthermore, we would need to pull out of human character and life all the strands of purity and peace, of faith and love and hope, that have been woven into the hearts and lives of men by the hand of Christ. We would have to stop all our preaching and praying and hush every Christian hymn and song. We would have no word of salvation from sin, no comfort in trouble, and no hope as we look out into the beyond. The world would lose its Light and be wrapped in night.

Do we want such a world? Can we believe that God would make such a world and leave us as "infants crying in the night, infants crying for the light, and with no language but a cry"?

XX. Has the Christmas Song Survived the World War?

UT has not the Christmas star already been extinguished in such a night? Has the angels' song survived the World War? Have not its notes of glory to God in the highest and peace among men been utterly drowned and lost in the rattle of machine rifles and the mighty explosions of monster guns that shook Europe and reverberated around the world? Was not this war the flat denial and total annihilation of the message and spirit of Jesus, entirely silencing the angels' song that gladdened the earth at his birth? Can it even be heard after many months when angry voices and the crash of falling wreckage still disturb the world? These ominous questions are causing anxiety to many Christian souls and may well give us pause.

But the gentlest forces are ever the mightiest and last the longest. The sunlight is swallowed up in the storm and the very sun itself seems blotted from the heavens, but presently the blackness breaks, the clouds roll away, and the sun again smiles upon the scene, as, indeed, it had never ceased to smile. The song of the birds is hushed in the crash of thunder and the rush and roar of wind and rain, but after the storm passes their dulcet voices again sing out with fresh gladness in their song. A hammer can pound ice to powder, but every particle is still unconquered ice, and only the gentle kiss of the sun can subdue and melt it into sweet water. High explosives and poisonous gas can devastate the earth, but only the balmy breath of the springtime can clothe it in verdure and cause it to burst into bud and bloom.

The war has indeed enwrapped and in a degree wrecked the world, and the voices

of peace were little heard in the storm. But now that the guns are silenced and the clouds are rolling away peace is again surging up in the heart of humanity as a passion and is at the work of clearing away the wreckage and of rebuilding the new and better world that all men hope is to emerge out of the ruins of the old. Alexander and Cæsar and Napoleon and the Kaiser—mark the anticlimax!—are gone, their swords are rust, their dreams are dust, but Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, to-day and forever. His penetrating and persistent voice was not really silenced even during the confusion of the war, rather was he then speaking in the thunderous tones of judgment; and now the Christmas angels are being heard again as birds are heard after the storm. The hand of Christ has been shaping the course of the world, even when convulsed in war, and is now remolding its plastic

elements into form. He has not been dethroned and discrowned in this world-cataclysm in which so many thrones and crowns have come tumbling down, but is still the Prince of Peace. The Man of Nazareth is speaking with a majestic voice to-day to all these nations and asserting the waste and wickedness of war and the brotherhood of man as they were never asserted before, and urging them to build a league of peace that may be the greatest outcome and blessing of the war. A new world may arise out of the ruins of the old that will be worth all the blood it cost and may be the prelude of the fulfillment of all the dreams of prophets and poets of a Parliament of Man under the rule of which "the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law." Then shall the angels' Christmas song break from the gallery of the skies and fill all the world with its notes, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth

peace among men in whom he is well pleased."

XXI. The Light of the World

JESUS was born into a dark world. Politically it was bound. Despotism constricted and strangled it at the top, and at the bottom its millions were shackled slaves. Intellectually it was decadent. Philosophy had stopped and stagnated in Athens, and no fresh current of thought was irrigating the world, no new light was breaking upon the human mind. Religiously its pagan faiths were outworn and dying or dead. Judaism itself had gone to seed and was only a dry husk. Morally the world was terribly corrupt, from its lowest slums up to the palaces of the rich where sensuality ran riot. As a consequence

of these conditions, pessimism spread a dark pall over the world. Men everywhere were in despair. They entertained the darkest and bitterest views of life. Nothing seemed to them worth while. The world was all a muddle, and the human heart cried out that life

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Into this dark world Jesus was born. He was only a babe, a single speck in the vast mass of humanity, but this Babe was luminous and shone with heavenly light. A star shed its radiance over his cradle—symbol and prophecy of his mission. As he grew in years he grew in luminosity until he lighted up Palestine and shot some rays across the borders of that little land into the great world. Death

could not quench his growing light, but he rose to heaven, as the sun rises to its zenith, whence his light now falls in increasing splendor over all the world.

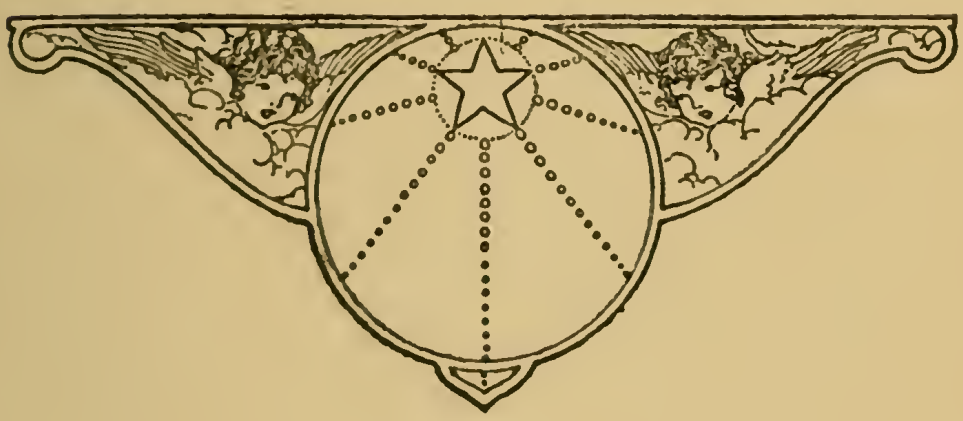
This Light has been shining nineteen hundred years and it has made a wide and deep impression on the darkness. Open the map of the world, and its bright spaces correspond with and are largely caused by the shining of this Light. The teachings and spirit and power and personality of Jesus are illuminating the world. Political despotism and slavery cannot live under the light of his gospel of brotherhood and are fleeing from his presence. Intellectual light is flooding all Christian lands: has it not been touched by his torch? Moral darkness is being penetrated and dissipated by the purity and peace of Christ. Pessimism meets its match and victor in his mighty jubilant optimism. He clears the world of the muddle of its confusion

and turns it into our Father's house. He lifts life up and makes it worth while in its great and grand meaning.

As from the uplifted hand of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor there shoots a sheaf of electric light that illuminates all the bay, so from the pierced hand of Christ there shines a blaze of light that penetrates and scatters the darkness of the world. We live in this Light. This is the meaning and true blessing of Christmas time. This is the real joy that breaks over the world on Christmas morning. All our gifts derive their significance from this Gift; all our joys are scintillations of this Light.

O thou Light of the world! In thy Light help us to see light. May sin not wrap us in darkness, may not a worldly life breed in us a spirit of bitterness and despair. Shine upon us with the light of thy truth

and thy love. Light up the world for us so that we shall see it as our Father's house. May thy presence put a deeper, richer, gladder meaning into all our life and pour a new splendor over all the world. And may nations come to thy Light and kings to the brightness of thy rising.



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